

Do You Remember?



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Horses and Telephones: Alice Young Laughlin

In their family memoir about life in the Altamont hills, *Upon These Rocks*, Claire and Edna (Teddy) Scullion wrote about their neighbor, Alice Young: “The young girl stood at the fence separating the Scullion and Young ranches. She was watching the most beautiful colt she had ever seen. Her daily visits became longer and longer and yes he came to expect them. As he pranced and ran with the winds, she knew he was running for her and with her.

Her father soon became aware of her great affection for the animal. He was constantly hearing her pleas, ‘Daddy, please can’t I have him?’ He explained that this colt would soon become a full grown horse and was special to Tom Scullion. In spite of this, the mutual admiration between girl and colt continued.” Finally, her father, Jesse Young, explained the problem to neighbor Tom Scullion and offered to buy the colt. Tom insisted that he wanted to give the colt to Alice. Jesse resisted this offer, but finally agreed, if he could work for Tom in trade. Throughout her life Alice loved horses.

Born in 1906, Alice was the daughter of Jesse and Rose Greeley Young. They farmed on rented property in the Altamont hills at the foot of Brushy Peak, and Alice rode her horse to Summit School. When the Livermore Rodeo began in 1918,

Alice loaned one of her horses to her cousin Christina Thiel, who carried the American flag on horseback as she led the riders over a hill at the rodeo’s opening. The first two rodeos were held in the Anderson’s arena near North Livermore Avenue. Alice, a month shy of her twelfth birthday, was one of 14 cowgirls who competed with 43 cowboys at the rodeo. The program divided the events into two categories—In-field and Track. The events that Alice probably competed in were Track Events—the Girl’s Cow Horse Race, the Girl’s Relay Race, and the Girl’s Stake Race. Alice was the proud owner of Livermore Stockman’s Rodeo Certificate #1.

In 1920 her father died of Spanish influenza, when Alice was only 14 years old. Their family moved into town on Eighth Street, across from the old Livermore High School, which was on the site of today’s Bothwell Center. In an interview in 2001 in the *Independent* by

Joan Zirker, Alice described one of her favorite horses: “Babe was quite a character. Her father was a racehorse, and her mother was a Nevada mustang. She was red, all red, without any white markings. She could be an ornery little devil.” Babe was the horse that she used in later competitions in the barrel racing event.

Alice graduated from Livermore High in 1925 and began to work as an operator for the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company in Livermore when hand-cranked phones were still in use. In the fall of 1926, PT&T replaced the old magneto (hand-crank) system in Livermore with a battery system and installed a new switchboard capable of handling 765 subscribers. The 620 crank-style phones were replaced with pedestal models. At first Alice had seen her position as a summer job before attending college, but she liked the work so well that she stayed with PT&T. Her cousin Claire Scullion worked under her supervision.

Their office was in the Masonic Building facing South Livermore Avenue.

According to another of the Scullions’ memoirs, *Echoes from the Whistle*, Alice said that one of her vivid memories of those days was the RAT. Claire told the story: “One bright morning we all reported to work to find the night operator was in a state of hysteria. She had been battling a huge rat all night. Finally it ran into the small restroom. She slammed the door. She could hear it thrashing round and round all night until it finally committed suicide by drowning in the toilet.” The women hoped that men who worked at or near the building would take the rat away in the morning, but they all refused. “The men filed past the huge beast hanging half way out of the toilet like they were walking past a casket. ... Yet no one dared remove it. This was before Woman’s Lib, but our brave Chief Operator, Alice, to the rescue. Like Teddy Roosevelt she

carried this big stick, removed the intruder, and threw it in the garbage. We disinfected the whole room and our work schedule was soon back to normal.”

Alice married Harry K. Laughlin, a cowhand and sometime bartender. When the Livermore telephone system changed to dial service in 1956, Claire and Alice both left Livermore to continue their careers with PT&T, Claire in Burlingame and Mountain View, and Alice in Crockett. Harry died in Crockett in 1965. Alice retired in 1970 as chief operator in Crockett and moved back to Livermore. Her friend, Sara Laughlin, enjoyed traveling with Alice. They journeyed to Canada, Tijuana, and New Orleans. They drove up many times to Tahoe—Sara said they went whenever a new show was scheduled. They partied, laughed, and sometimes were silly together. Sara remembered especially the all-night parties at the Gerbers in the San Antone Valley, when everyone slept outside in the hay stacks. Once when Alice was keeping her horse near May School, Sara went with her to get the horse. The horse had other ideas—they had to chase her all the way into downtown Livermore. In Alice’s obituary in 2002, her niece, Kathryn Laughlin, said of her: “She was a woman of simple loves, pleasures, and tastes. She loved life and loved her friends.”

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